

# The Boston Globe

## *A New Battleground*

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EAGER TO BEAT Republicans at the national security game, Democratic strategists recruited military veterans to run for Congress.

Now, the victorious have to figure out how they fit into a political versus a combat operation.

For example, Joseph A. Sestak Jr., a former Navy vice admiral with 31 years of service, won a seat in Pennsylvania's Seventh District. Now Sestak is educating himself about the rules of engagement in Washington.

After checking with the House historian, Sestak said he was told he is the highest ranking member of the military to win election to the House of Representatives. He hopes those credentials give him "immediate entree" on defense and national security issues. But he also knows that freshmen don't always get the committee assignments they might prefer - in his case, that would be armed services and education -- or the platform they desire.

Conforming to Washington sensibilities could be a challenge for some. Virginia's newly elected Democratic senator, James Webb, a former Marine, an ex-Republican, and a Navy secretary under Ronald Reagan, has a brash style that is already making headlines. The Washington Post reported that Webb declined to stand in a presidential receiving line or have his picture taken with President Bush at a recent White House reception for freshman members of Congress. Webb also brushed off Bush when he inquired about his son, a Marine serving in Iraq, saying, "I'd like to get them out of Iraq, Mr. President."

While declining to criticize Webb, Sestak said he would have no problem shaking hands with Bush even though he opposes the administration's Iraq war policy and believes Bush made "significant errors." He said, "I tend to look at the president as also representing the institution of the presidency."

Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts helped Sestak in his bid to defeat GOP incumbent Curt Weldon, as did Steven Grossman, a major Democratic fund-raiser from Massachusetts and former chairman of the Democratic National Committee. "He has a unique set of credentials, a unique pulpit. If the Democratic Party is looking for credible leadership, who better than Joe Sestak?" said Grossman, during a breakfast with Sestak

over the Thanksgiving weekend, while the newly elected congressman was visiting relatives in the Boston area.

In Pennsylvania, Sestak, 54, and two other military veterans -- Chris Carney, a Navy Reserve lieutenant commander, and Patrick Murphy, an Army Reserve captain and lawyer -- join Representative John Murtha, a Vietnam combat veteran and dean of the delegation.

Murtha's call for withdrawal from Iraq last fall led the way for other Democrats, and he is expected to influence the House's Iraq debate. It remains to be seen whether Murtha suffers any political fallout after losing the majority leader's post, 146-86, to Representative Steny Hoyer of Maryland, despite support from incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. During the showdown with Hoyer, the media resurrected Murtha's role as unindicted coconspirator in the 1980 Abscam bribery scandals.

Sestak, who backed Murtha, said that he initially feared "the mudsplashing" bolstered the perception of "there go the Democrats again." That possibility worried him, he said, because he agrees with others who label the Nov. 7 election results an opportunity, not a mandate.

As he sees it, the voters "threw the other party out," and Democrats still must prove the merits of the alternative: "The message was, 'fix the problems.' It wasn't that the Democratic Party is a better group of people."

He also views Iraq as "the cloak around other concerns," not the voters' sole reason for ousting Republicans. In Sestak's case, his opponent faced reports about a Justice Department investigation into whether he improperly used his influence to win contracts for his daughter's lobbying firm.

A defense policy director on the Clinton administration's National Security Council, Sestak considers the Iraq invasion a mistake because "Iraq was never a present danger." He now supports setting a definite timetable to "redeploy physically out of Iraq." He also has a harsh view of the Bush-era NSC, saying that when it comes to "the moral courage to stand for your ideas during this administration, it wasn't always welcome. It wasn't always there."

He believes the transition from military to political engagement requires time and study. For one thing, Sestak said, "In the military, you get questioned, but it is done within the organization and respectful tones are most often used. On the streets, citizens can give blunt opinions."

Yes, sir. Mastering the political battleground can challenge even the most seasoned soldier.